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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 000406

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, NSC FOR MARIA GERMANO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: LTP RETURNS WITH LONG-TERM STRATEGY TO CHALLENGE
SARGSIAN

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) LTP returned to Armenia's political ring on May 2, addressing 2,000 supporters in his first outing in two months. LTP blamed ex-President Kocharian for the March 1 events, attacked the West's assessment of the presidential election, and said new polls were the only way out of the crisis. He announced the creation of a national congress of opposition groups, insisted on the release of political prisoners, and warned Azerbaijan against military adventurism. Reactions to LTP's return varied, with Kocharian issuing a scathing retort. END SUMMARY.

SUPREME CONFIDENCE

¶2. (C) Noticeably suntanned -- from gardening, according to his top advisers -- and exuding uncanny confidence for someone in his shoes, LTP gave an emotional address to 2,000 diehard opposition supporters for 90 minutes in a government-provided conference hall located less than 100 meters away from the former office of ex-Prime Minister and presidential rival Serzh Sargsian. (NOTE: After the authorities initially refused to provide a meeting space for the congress, it then reversed course at the last minute, once it learned organizers were about to hold it in Tbilisi, Georgia. END NOTE.) Repeatedly interrupted by applause and defiant protest chants of "Levon! Levon!" "Now! Now!" and "Struggle, Struggle, To The End!" LTP took the podium after key election allies and other opposition leaders -- now including the Amcit wife of the jailed ex-Foreign Minister of Armenia Alexander Arzumanyan -- spent three hours alternatively slamming the authorities and exhorting supporters to continue to fight. LTP's address was punctuated by the playing of the Karabakh movement theme song (accompanied by the trademark raised fists), Armenia's national anthem, and Beethoven's Ode To Joy. Significant numbers of youth and women supporters -- including the wives of political detainees, LTP's advisers, and his own wife Lyudmila -- attended the four-and-a-half hour event that proceeded peacefully without any police interference.

KOCHARIAN TO BLAME FOR MARCH 1 VIOLENCE AND VICTIMS

¶3. (SBU) LTP used the first half of his address to blame ex-President Kocharian for the March 1 violence, and accused him of lying to cover up his responsibility for the resultant bloodshed. LTP called Kocharian the "conductor" of a "propaganda machine" that "is trying to portray the events of March 1 as a clash between protesters and police provoked by the opposition." He added that law enforcement bodies "are being asked to prove the unprovable (sic), to turn the victim into the executioner and the executioner into a victim." He cautioned that authorities would succeed at their task absent pressure from the Armenian public and the international community.

¶4. (SBU) LTP also called Kocharian a liar for stating that police had presented a search order to protesters encamped in Freedom Square the morning of March 1. Basing his account on his presence at the scene, LTP vividly recounted how police launched an unannounced assault on protesters with "ruthless baton strikes" and "electroshock devices." LTP rhetorically asked why three to four thousand policemen were needed to perform a search operation. He also belittled Kocharian's public statement that "the police were not armed with firearms" on the second half of March 1 when dislodged protesters massed near the French Embassy. LTP quizzically asked how police could have been unarmed if seven protesters had already been killed by firearms before Kocharian decreed the state of emergency later that evening, when armed military units were deployed around the city. LTP also ridiculed Kocharian's insistence that protesters were armed, pointing out that in the two months since the March 1 events no video footage has surfaced to support this claim. (NOTE: This point on the lack of incriminating video footage also figures prominently in the recent report on the March 1 events by Armenia's embattled Ombudsman. Septel. END NOTE.) LTP noted that the video footage which has surfaced instead shows police using firearms on protesters.

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WEST BLEW THE ELECTION, BUT THEY CAN MAKE AMENDS

¶5. (SBU) LTP criticized the West -- he said "West" meant "primarily European organizations" -- for its "irresponsible" monitoring missions that characterized Armenia's flawed presidential election as "mostly in line" with international standards. He said the rush to judgment "legitimized the disgraceful elections that took place in Armenia," and allowed the authorities to use the West's imprimatur on the elections to "orchestrate the bloody scheme of March 1." LTP said that the Europeans would "lose their prestige in Armenia irrevocably" if they allow the authorities to get away with the ongoing crackdown against opposition supporters who backed LTP during the election. He declared that some of that prestige could be re-won if European organizations carried through on their commitments to punish Armenian authorities absent the latter's compliance with an April 17 resolution by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). LTP said that in the end, however, it was up to Armenians themselves to solve their problems, and not Europe. (NOTE: PACE resolution 1609 specifies the potential suspension of Armenia's voting rights at PACE if Armenian authorities by PACE's June 2008 part-session do not show "considerable progress" in carrying out an independent investigation of the March 1 events, release individuals detained for political motives, and repeal the recent amendments to Armenia's controversial law on meetings and rallies. END NOTE.)

CALLS FOR NEW ELECTIONS, ANNOUNCES OPPOSITION CONGRESS

¶6. (SBU) LTP characterized the current political situation as "a horrendous abyss between the majority of people and a

small group of individuals who have usurped power through fraud and bloodshed." LTP declared the only way to defuse tensions was via new presidential and parliamentary elections. Admitting that this proposition "requires some time to mature" before the authorities and European organizations accept it, LTP outlined a long-term strategy to unseat the ruling regime, announcing the creation of the "Armenian National Congress" to unite Armenia's fragmented opposition. LTP said the renaming of his election-campaign "Pan National Movement" was necessary in order to "inject new substance" into the movement that could channel "the mindset of the public that refuses to accept the current state of affairs." He stated the ANC was inspired by other "national-liberation movements in world history," and his advisers later confirmed to Emboff that LTP was thinking of the African National Congress and Indian National Congress as role models. LTP conceded that the idea of the ANC was preliminary, and needed further discussion at future gatherings. But he also said the ANC could one day evolve into a "political party with a tight structure" that could function as a "shadow government."

ASKS USG TO CONTINUE MCC, WARNS AZERBAIJAN

¶7. (C) LTP welcomed the fact that PACE "has moved to action and has threatened to punish the authorities" if the government does not fulfill the conditions spelled out in resolution 1609. But he warned of lumping together political sanctions against the regime with economic sanctions that hurt the Armenian public. In this regard, he said he was "appealing to the government of the United States and the administration of the Millennium Challenge Fund" not to reduce or terminate the MCA program in Armenia. He also warned Azerbaijan against exploiting Armenia's domestic politics to launch military attacks against Nagorno-Karabakh. LTP declared that "any military action against Karabakh will meet the united resistance of our people," and that he would ask his supporters to suspend all political activities temporarily in order to defend "the fatherland."

DIALOGUE ONLY AFTER RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

¶8. (SBU) LTP ended his address with what he called "the most burning issue" of the day, which he said was "the immediate release of all political prisoners, without any distinction." LTP vowed that there could be "no dialogue or any talk of

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reconciliation" without the release of those detained for their political activities. LTP acknowledged the sacrifices of the detained, and told the audience that through intermediaries the detainees had asked him not to allow their cases be used as blackmail against the opposition movement.

REACTIONS OF KOCHARIAN, OPPOSITION, PEOPLE

¶9. (C) Reactions to LTP's return varied considerably. Immediately after LTP's address, the leader of Armenia's (tiny) Green Party told Emboff he was receptive to the idea of an Armenian National Congress, but doubted his party would support it any time soon. He saw the "ANC" as a possible pole that would attract an array of smaller, non-affiliated groups that have emerged since March 1. On May 9, the leader of the People's Party of Armenia Stepan Demirchian also gave a guarded assessment of the ANC, calling LTP's proposal "tentative" and adding that "it is still too early to talk about" a merger of political parties into the ANC. On the grassroots level, ordinary Armenians whom Emboffs spoke with around the country had either no knowledge of LTP's public address, or were reluctant to discuss it at all. Merchants

in an upscale local neighborhood whom Emboff regularly surveys for their reactions to political events unexpectedly turned a cold shoulder when he raised LTP's re-emergence. A young adult acquaintance of many years from northern Armenia told him that "people are scared" to talk politics now, in light of the ongoing crackdown of LTP supporters. Another family from the same northern town said they were disgusted by Armenian Public TV showing only "seconds" from LTP's May 2 congress. A different family told Emboff they "could not care less" about LTP, or anything new he had to say.

¶10. (SBU) Ending a month of silence since his departure from office on April 9, ex-President Kocharian on May 12 issued a scathing attack of the May 2 statements. Kocharian said that even by pouring "mud on himself, Levon Ter-Petrossian will not manage to clean himself." In response to LTP's allegation that Kocharian deliberately used lethal force to break up the post-election protests, Kocharian replied that "only the weak-headed, or a deeply immoral person may contend that authorities can deliberately plan the use of arms" against their own people. Kocharian put the blame for post-election developments on LTP's shoulders, saying LTP "did everything to provoke unrest and make the police use force." Kocharian also insisted "that there was no house arrest" ever placed on LTP, noting that LTP was told he could return to his supporters on March 1, but that "the participation of state security guards at illegal rallies, which had grown into mass unrest, was impermissible." Calling LTP "a coward," Kocharian contended that if LTP were "a responsible man," he would have "renounced the protection and joined the people who trusted him." Kocharian summed up his appraisal of LTP by stating the latter "has complex relations with morality," and that LTP "needs all these lies" to manipulate his supporters.

LTP'S LIEUTENANTS FINALLY ON TV

¶11. (C) On May 12, Armenian Public TV unexpectedly invited Levon Zurabian, a long-time political adviser to LTP, for a prime time live interview. What ensued was a hostile exchange between the aggressive host who talked over Zurabian as the latter delivered his own talking points -- generally unconnected to the interviewer's questions -- about the election and post-election crisis. Zurabian challenged the authorities' version of March 1-2 events, called Public TV "a disgrace" for its pro-government bias, and accused the station of concealing important information from the public having to do with the current political situation. The host accused Zurabian of hypocrisy, alleging Zurabian himself had shut down media outlets when serving as LTP's spokesperson in the 1990s. Zurabian announced that if the authorities do not fulfill the conditions outlined in PACE resolution 1609, and allow political rallies, the opposition will organize a rally -- sanctioned or not -- on June 20 in Freedom Square. The pro-government Kentron TV (controlled by Prosperous Armenia MP/oligarch Gagik Tsarukian) also hosted on its May 12 evening "Outline" program the leader of the youth wing of the pro-LTP Armenian National Movement (ANM) political party. The youth leader debated with representatives from the ruling coalition Republican and Dashnak parties, in what proved a more civil exchange than had occurred on Public TV. The youth leader echoed Zurabian's call for the implementation of

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resolution 1609 before the opposition could enter into dialogue.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) LTP's forceful return, and the visceral response it evoked in ex-President Kocharian, augur ill for a compromise solution to the political crisis. If the authorities don't

carry out the PACE resolution, Armenia risks becoming an international pariah and having Sargsian's legitimacy further weakened in the eyes of his people. If the authorities fulfill the conditions, LTP benefits from new rallies and platforms with which to energize his base. With the June deadline for the PACE resolution soon approaching, the continued clampdown on the opposition, and the new threat from LTP's camp to take to the streets without government sanction, Armenia could become a summer tinderbox for new protests, clashes and crackdowns. What remains hard to judge is whether widespread public outrage from the immediate post-election period has quieted back into stoic tolerance of the regime's anti-democratic abuses, or whether large swathes of the populace remain ready to take to the streets and confront the authorities when LTP next calls on them.

¶13. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: We should not be swayed by LTP's (politically motivated) call for Millennium Challenge to continue no matter what. Our policy has never been about supporting LTP or supporting the government. Allowing an opposition leader (whose own democratic credentials are deeply tarnished) to sway our policy view would be just as bad as letting the authorities do so. Our MCC policy -- and other assistance program decisions -- should be based on our own assessment of Armenia's performance against the declared goals of the program, on preserving the long-term credibility of our democracy advocacy, and on how we can best influence this political system back to a more democratic path. END COMMENT.
PENNINGTON